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Tampering With Justice

Among the words uttered by those around Senator Kennedy just after that fatal moment in Los Angeles Tuesday night were, "We don't want another Oswald." These people were well aware of how the Dallas Police Department compounded the tragedy of President Kennedy's assassination with its casual handling of Lee Harvey Oswald. They did not wish the Nation to go through another similar assault on its system of justice and they took the first steps to make sure that it did not by providing physical protection for the suspect.

With one spectacular exception, everyone else connected with the tragedy in Los Angeles—friends, policemen, officials, newsmen—have kept that and the other lessons of Dallas clearly in mind. That one exception is the Mayor of Los Angeles, Sam Yorty, who seems to have learned from Dallas only how to get publicity for himself.

Despite reminders from his Chief of Police, his state's Attorney General, and the Attorney General of the United States, Mr. Yorty has already added substantial complications to the trial of Sirhan Sirhan. His statements about the certainty of Mr. Sirhan's guilt and about the motivation for the crime, add immeasurably to the argument, certain to be made at the trial, that an unprejudiced jury cannot be selected to judge Sirhan. As a lawyer, Mayor Yorty ought to have known better. As a public official, he had a responsibility to act more wisely.

Mr. Yorty has defended his actions on the ground that he has provided information the public has a right to know. But little he has said has been aimed at giving the public the information it needs and many of his comments fit peculiarly well with the political views he has long tried to advance.

The actions of the Los Angeles Police Department stand in sharp contrast with those of Mayor Yorty. It has protected the suspect carefully and kept him out of sight. It has provided the basic information the public needed to know but it has refused to divulge additional evidence. It has refrained from discussing Mr. Sirhan in terms more specific than "suspect." It has apparently made sure that his rights under the Constitution were fully protected. Chief Reddin and his men, intent upon doing their job without worrying about a public demonstration of their excellence, have learned the lessons of Dallas.

It is vitally important that those lessons be followed. Mr. Sirhan is entitled to the same fair trial before an impartial jury that every person accused of crime in this country is entitled to. He is entitled to be regarded only as a suspect until that trial occurs, regardless of the evidence against him. Above all, of course, he must receive whatever protection is necessary to ensure that he stands trial. In a time of lawlessness, it is all the more vital for a Nation to live within its laws.